

# *Ben Garrido Blaz*

## *1928–*

TERRITORIAL DELEGATE 1985–1993  
REPUBLICAN FROM GUAM

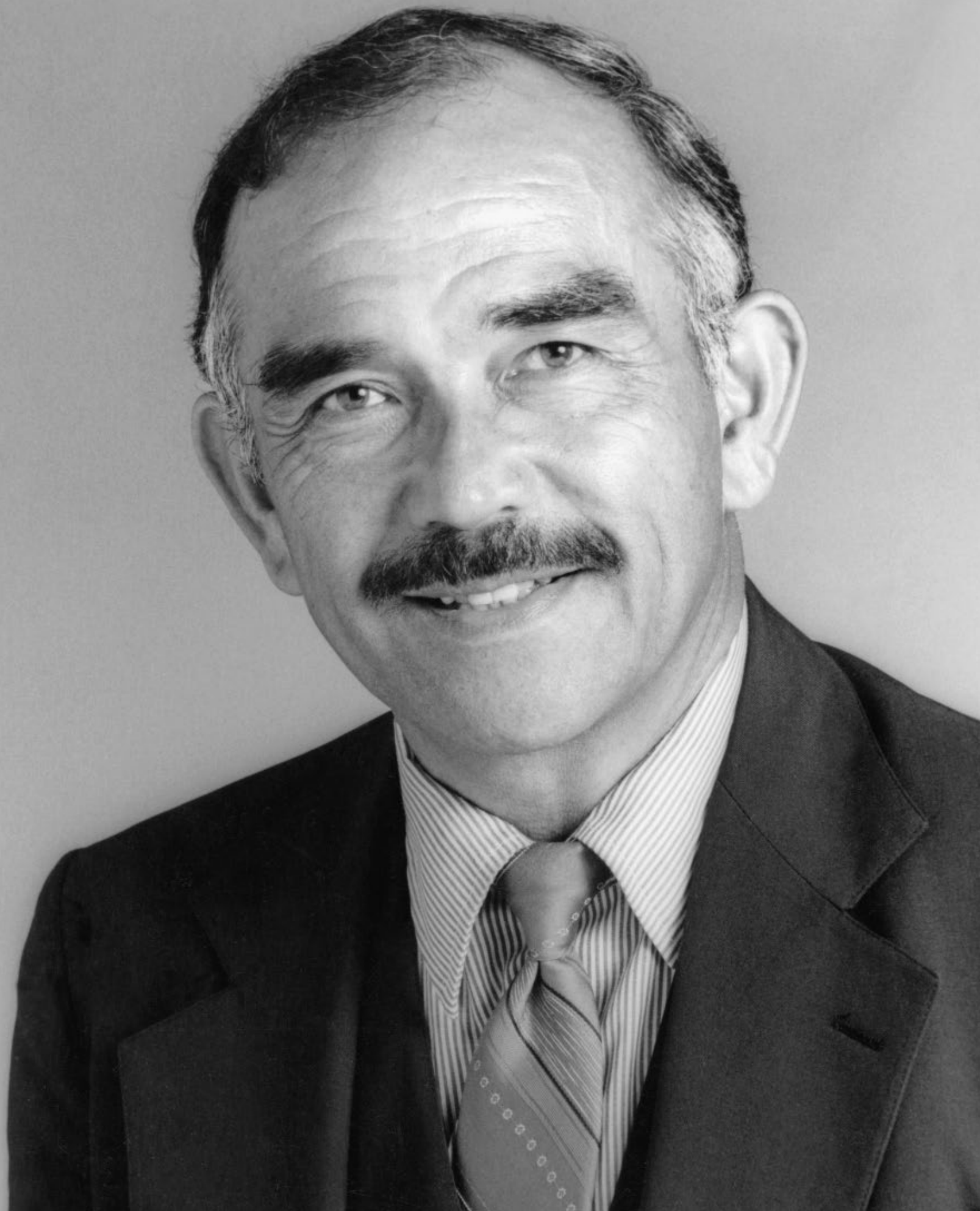
In 1985, Ben Garrido Blaz became the first Hispanic American to represent the Western Pacific island of Guam in Congress. A decorated military veteran who became a politician later in life, Blaz focused on issues of local importance to the island territory. Acutely influenced by the Japanese invasion of Guam during World War II, Blaz used his national position to bring attention to the sacrifices and hardships of the era, including his own imprisonment. During his four terms in the House, Blaz led the charge for commonwealth status for his native land. “We in Guam have embarked on a voyage of political self-determination—a desire on our part for greater local autonomy and an equal place in the American political family.”<sup>1</sup>

Vicente Tomas (Ben) Garrido Blaz was born February 14, 1928, in Agana, the capital of Guam.<sup>2</sup> Thirteen years old when the Japanese invaded Guam during World War II, Blaz worked in labor camps building aviation fields, planting rice, and digging trenches until American forces retook the island in 1944.<sup>3</sup> After the war ended in 1945, Blaz returned to school. In 1947 he left Guam after earning an academic scholarship to the University of Notre Dame. Blaz majored in physics and chemistry.<sup>4</sup> While in school, he joined the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve at the onset of the Korean War. After graduating from Notre Dame in 1951 with a B.S. degree, he was commissioned a second lieutenant. Blaz served two overseas tours in Japan and one in Vietnam. In 1963 he earned an M.A. in management from The George Washington University, and in 1971 he graduated from the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Blaz rose to the rank of brigadier general in 1977, becoming Guam’s highest-ranking military officer.<sup>5</sup> That same year he headed the Marine information division that was tasked with improving public relations in the post–Vietnam War era.<sup>6</sup> Blaz’s military honors include the Legion of Merit, the Bronze

Medal with Combat “V,” the Navy Commendation Medal, and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.<sup>7</sup> Blaz married Ann Evers, a teacher, and the couple had two sons, Mike and Tom. After retiring from the military in 1981, Blaz returned to his native island, where he taught at the University of Guam. Blaz received an honorary LL.D. degree from the University of Guam in 1974.

On August 1, 1950, President Harry S. Truman signed the Organic Act of Guam, granting U.S. citizenship and limited self-government to the inhabitants of Guam. In 1972 the House of Representatives granted congressional representation to Guam and the Virgin Islands. Territorial Delegates were permitted to serve on and vote in committee, but they could not vote on the House Floor. In the 93rd Congress (1973–1975) Antonio Won Pat became the first Delegate to represent Guam in the U.S. House of Representatives. Despite Won Pat’s popularity and his impressive political résumé, which included service as speaker of the Guam assembly, Blaz challenged the longtime Delegate in 1982. “One reason I decided to run,” Blaz revealed, “is that I did not get the sense that bureaucrats understand and appreciate Guam’s uniqueness.... We’re 100,000 American citizens who deserve a rightful spot in the American family.”<sup>8</sup> Blaz attempted to offset his opponent’s experience by emphasizing the need for a new, more aggressive strategy to represent Guam—especially with regard to the island’s political status.<sup>9</sup> Although his first run for Congress was not successful, Blaz earned an impressive 48 percent of the vote against incumbent Won Pat.<sup>10</sup>

Encouraged by his strong showing at the polls, Blaz challenged Won Pat again in 1984. Both candidates ran unopposed in the primary, but voters had the option of crossing party lines. Tellingly, Blaz polled nearly 2,000 more votes than the incumbent.<sup>11</sup> During the general



election campaign, 75-year-old Won Pat stressed his seniority in Congress. The challenger countered by reminding voters that his Republican Party affiliation would be an asset for Guam under the Ronald W. Reagan administration.<sup>12</sup> “Although I’ll be a junior I’m not exactly without friends,” Blaz added. “There are many ways to explain clout—seniority is just one of them.”<sup>13</sup>

During the tightly contested campaign, Blaz criticized his opponent’s attendance record in Congress and accused Won Pat of missing opportunities to improve Guam’s economy while serving as its Delegate.<sup>14</sup> He also promised to ensure that Guamanians enjoyed the same privileges as U.S. citizens on the mainland. After the ballots were tallied on Election Day, Blaz had a razor-thin lead of about 300 votes, leading the Guam Election Commission to authorize a recount. On November 11, 1984, the commission certified the election, declaring Blaz the winner by 354 votes.<sup>15</sup> “I’m ready,” Blaz remarked. “I’ve been ready for 40 years. I’m on a mission.”<sup>16</sup>

Though eager to start his new career, Blaz still had to contend with the remnants of a competitive and heated campaign. Initially conciliatory, Won Pat ultimately contested the election. Citing “substantial irregularities,” Won Pat asked the House to overturn the election results, claiming Blaz had not received a majority of the votes. (Unlike in most congressional races in the United States, in which Representatives need only capture a plurality, Delegates in Guam must win a majority of votes to avoid a runoff election.) The House denied Won Pat’s challenge on July 24, 1985, by a voice vote, citing insufficient evidence.<sup>17</sup> “Deep down inside I didn’t have doubts, but the House of Representatives is hard to predict,” Blaz commented afterward.

At the beginning of the 99th Congress (1985–1987), the freshman class elected Blaz as its president, marking the first time a Territorial Delegate held this informal leadership position.<sup>18</sup> Blaz received two committee assignments, Armed Services and Interior and Insular Affairs. Both fit his legislative interests and allowed him to oversee and influence legislation affecting Guam. Blaz retained these two assignments during his eight years in the

House. In the 100th Congress (1987–1989), he also had a spot on the Foreign Affairs Committee, which he kept until he left Congress in 1993. From 1985 until 1993, he served on the Select Committee on Aging.

Guam’s strategic location in the Western Pacific Ocean significantly affected Blaz’s legislative focus in Congress. After the Americans regained control of Guam during World War II, the island became a military bastion for the United States and a vital Cold War defense point. Guam’s economy prospered with the influx of federal spending for the island’s conversion to a military outpost. It continued to flourish after the Vietnam War, with a construction boom sparked by a budding tourism industry—fueled mainly by Japan. Blaz, however, questioned the need for the U.S. military’s vast land holdings on Guam throughout the latter half of the 20th century. In 1992 he introduced the Guam Excess Lands Act, which called for the United States to return to Guam specified areas that had been appropriated by the military during World War II. According to the Guam Delegate, the U.S. forces increased their presence after they regained control of Guam, instead of downsizing at the war’s end. “These lands have remained unjustly inaccessible to my constituents ever since, even though much of it has not been used since the war for any military purpose,” Blaz stated. He went on to say that returning the land to the people of Guam would help the nation’s economy and “close the books on the issue of excess lands since the military has repeatedly indicated that it has no further use for them.”<sup>19</sup>

Throughout his tenure in the House, Blaz sought to publicize Guam’s role during World War II. Blaz offered a firsthand account of the hardships the people endured during Japan’s nearly three-year occupation. “There are many horrible and appalling stories I could tell about the atrocities inflicted upon our people,” he said, “about mysterious disappearances of friends, about discoveries of decapitated corpses tied to trees, about clearing jungles under the barrel of a gun and about the hunger and deprivation of concentration camps.”<sup>20</sup> Blaz also recalled serving as commanding officer of the same Marine regiment that rescued him and eventually liberated Guam

in 1944. “Taking command of the Ninth Marines was and remains the proudest moment of my life,” he observed.<sup>21</sup> Building upon legislation drafted by Won Pat in 1983, Blaz introduced a bill to establish a Commission on War Claims to examine assertions of damages that were suffered by the people of Guam at the hands of Japanese occupation forces. Although he did not attain this goal while he was serving in Congress, Blaz continued to fight for federal reparations for Guam. In 2005 he testified before the House Committee on Resources in favor of the Guam World War II Loyalty Recognition Act. “Loyalty and appreciation for their liberation made many of them hesitant to seek compensation for death, injuries, and damages in the years immediately following liberation,” Blaz explained.<sup>22</sup>

While in the House, Blaz worked on a range of issues to fortify Guam’s economy. The island relied heavily on the fishing industry. During the 99th Congress, Blaz introduced a bill to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to allow alien crewmen working on U.S. fishing boats to go ashore while working in Guam. As Guam was the home port for America’s Western Pacific tuna fleet, which supplied much of the tuna for the United States, the fleet’s presence had a major impact on Guam’s economy. Blaz’s measure called for the continued presence of U.S. fishing fleets and the same shore leave privileges for all crew members, regardless of their national origin. “Since Guam is America’s bridge to the Pacific and its finest symbol it is essential that the free enterprise system flourish there,” Blaz observed.<sup>23</sup> Blaz’s bill became law on October 21, 1986. The Guam Delegate also sought to extend supplemental security income (SSI)—federal benefits for low-income, disabled, or elderly American citizens—to his constituents. Blaz introduced legislation to “reverse the meaningless discrimination” of SSI funding, which included residents of the District of Columbia and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands but not the residents of other U.S. territories like Guam. “Affording these benefits to residents of one island and not to another is tantamount to extending benefits to residents of Chicago’s North Side but not to fellow Americans in the South side,” Blaz concluded.<sup>24</sup> Blaz also supported federal

assistance for educational programs in Guam, including funding for vocational education and improvements to elementary and secondary education. To help the many veterans residing in Guam, Blaz introduced the Veterans’ Educational Assistance Act during his first term in the House. The measure called for expanded eligibility for basic assistance under the GI Bill.

Throughout his tenure, Blaz’s most consistent and fervent cause remained improving Guam’s political status. He routinely introduced legislation to establish Guam as an American commonwealth rather than an unincorporated U.S. territory. “Commonwealth is the principal issue for Guam,” Blaz asserted. “It’s not a Democratic issue and it’s not a Republican issue. It’s a distinctly Guam issue with political, civil and human rights issues in it.”<sup>25</sup> On March 7, 1988, the same week as Discovery Day—a holiday commemorating the founding of Guam by Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan—Blaz introduced the Guam Commonwealth Act. Resulting from the work of the bipartisan Commission on Self-Determination, and ratified by Guam’s voters, the measure called for complete self-government for the people of Guam, the preservation of the indigenous Chamorro culture, and consultation with the United States about matters that would affect the island. Advocating a partnership with the United States, Blaz reminded his House colleagues of Guam’s sacrifices throughout the 20th century. “We on Guam paid our dues—as heavily in war as in peace—to prove our loyalty and pride as members of the American family. Still, we have never enjoyed equal status with other Americans—either politically or economically.”<sup>26</sup> Although the Guam Commonwealth Act never made it out of committee, Blaz reintroduced it twice.<sup>27</sup>

Blaz did not limit his quest for equal rights to Guam. In 1991 he came out in support of statehood for the District of Columbia and compared the plight of his constituents with that of the residents of D.C. “Yet the people of Guam—Americans all—remain second-class citizens. Like the people of the District of Columbia, they are denied the fundamental rights afforded their counterparts elsewhere,” he said.<sup>28</sup> He also backed



legislation sponsored by Virgin Islands Delegate Ron de Lugo that called for increased sovereignty of the U.S. territories of the Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. “The measure before us is the result of careful consideration and comes to the floor with bipartisan support,” Blaz observed. “It contains several items of importance to each of the territorial representatives and the American citizens from the territories and I urge approval of its passage.”<sup>29</sup> The final version of the bill, which became law on August 27, 1986, provided additional funding for and greater autonomy over Guam’s education system. During the 99th Congress, Blaz demonstrated further solidarity for his nonvoting colleagues and their constituents by introducing legislation to authorize inclusion in the Capitol’s National Statuary Hall Collection of statues from Washington, D.C.; Puerto Rico; Guam; the Virgin Islands; and American Samoa.<sup>30</sup>

Until his last election in 1992, Blaz encountered only modest competition in his campaigns to serve as Guam’s Delegate. In 1986 he trounced Frank Torres, a former adjutant general of the National Guard, with 65 percent of the vote; in his subsequent two elections he easily defeated Vicente Pangelinan, a political veteran who worked for Delegate Won Pat, and Guam governor Ricardo Bordallo, capturing 55 percent of the ballots cast in both contests.<sup>31</sup> In his bid for a fifth term in the House, Blaz faced a strong challenge from Robert Underwood, a longtime educator with strong community ties in Guam. Underwood ran an effective grass-roots campaign, criticizing Blaz for not spending enough time in Guam. Blaz countered by emphasizing his military and congressional record.<sup>32</sup> Constituting an unexpected obstacle to Blaz’s re-election, a typhoon postponed voting in Guam for nearly a week. By the time voters cast their ballots for Delegate, they knew that William J. (Bill) Clinton had been elected President; this was significant because Blaz had underscored the value of Guam’s Delegate being from the same party as the U.S. President.<sup>33</sup> On Election Day, Blaz garnered only 45 percent of the vote. He later offered to help his successor during the transition, remarking that his political career “started and ended on the high road.”<sup>34</sup>

After leaving the House, Blaz taught at the University of Guam. He currently resides in Fairfax, Virginia.<sup>35</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, “Ben Garrido Blaz,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

## NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 101st Cong., 1st sess. (9 March 1989): 4007.
- 2 Formerly called Agana, Guam’s capital was renamed Hagatna, which is Chamorro. The names of Blaz’s parents did not appear in any secondary sources, campaign materials, or newspaper articles. The 1930 Census listed a Vicente G. Blar (Blas) born in Guam in 1928, to Vicente and Rita Blar (Blas). *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*: Piti, Piti, Guam, Roll 2629, page 1A, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com> (accessed 25 May 2012).
- 3 “Vicente Tomas (Ben) Blaz,” <http://bisitaguam.com/bio/index.html> (accessed 9 January 2012).
- 4 Neither the name of the high school Blaz attended nor the date of his high school graduation is available on his website, “Vicente Tomas (Ben) Blaz,” <http://bisitaguam.com/bio/index.html> (accessed 11 April 2011). Newspaper accounts provide contradictory information about the high school Blaz attended. See, for example, “Election 1992, a Special Project of the *Pacific Daily News*,” 2 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 2; Jeremiah O’Leary, “Guam Delegate’s Rise Parallels Struggle for Civil Rights,” 17 July 1989, *Washington Times*: B1.
- 5 Elaine Santos, “The Delegate,” 4 November 1984, *Pacific Daily News*: 3.
- 6 Harold J. Logan, “Information Head Says Marines Must Be Open to Scrutiny,” 2 July 1977, *Washington Post*: A6.
- 7 “Vicente Tomas (Ben) Blaz,” <http://bisitaguam.com/bio/index.html> (accessed 11 April 2011); O’Leary, “Guam Delegate’s Rise Parallels Struggle for Civil Rights.”
- 8 Susan Kreifels, “‘We Deserve a Rightful Spot,’” 29 October 1982, *Pacific Daily News*: 3.
- 9 Paul J. Borja, “‘No Substitute for Experience,’” 29 October 1982, *Pacific Daily News*: 3; Kreifels, “‘We Deserve a Rightful Spot.’”
- 10 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 11 “Rival’s Tally in Guam Overshadows Incumbent,” 3 September 1984, *New York Times*: 9.
- 12 Elaine Santos, “Won Pat, Blaz Face Off,” 1 November 1984, *Pacific Daily News*: 1.

- 13 Santos, "The Delegate."
- 14 Campaign Material for Ben Blaz; "Issues Facing Guam Now," 3 November 1984, *Pacific Daily News*: 41.
- 15 Kate Pound, "Recount Set for Delegate Race," 8 November 1984, *Pacific Daily News*: 1; Yvonne Martinez, "It's Blaz by 354 Votes," 11 November 1984, *Pacific Daily News*: 1; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 16 Paul J. Borja, "Blaz: On a New Mission," 12 November 1984, *Pacific Daily News*: 1.
- 17 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 1st sess. (24 July 1985): 20180–20181; "House Rejects Bid to Overturn Election of Guam Delegate," 25 July 1985, *Los Angeles Times*: 23; "House Denies Won Pat Challenge," 26 July 1985, *Pacific Daily News*: 1; Stephen Labaton, "Guam Delegate Resists Demand for Runoff Vote," 6 June 1985, *Washington Post*: A7; Stephen Labaton, "Guam's Seat in Congress Still Disputed," 4 June 1985, *Washington Post*: A12.
- 18 "Minority Reports," 16 December 1984, *New York Times*: E20.
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (5 February 1992): 1691.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (26 November 1991): 35435.
- 21 Blaz took command of the Ninth Regiment of the Marines 27 years after the liberation of Guam. Blaz recalled escaping with several companions from a Japanese concentration camp shortly after U.S. troops invaded Guam in 1944. The Marines mistook Blaz for a Japanese soldier and briefly held him as a prisoner of war. According to Blaz, the Japanese captured and killed two Guamanians in his group who ran in a different direction. Bernard E. Trainor, "Lack of Vote Doesn't Deter Delegate from Guam," 3 February 1988, *New York Times*: B6.
- 22 The Honorable Ben Garrido Blaz, "Testimony before the Committee on Resources, United States House of Representatives," April 20, 1985, Hearing on H.R. 1595; James Brooke, "Decades after Abuses by the Japanese, Guam Hopes the Military Will Make Amends," 14 August 2005, *New York Times*: 16.
- 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (12 May 1986): 10276.
- 24 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (18 February 1992): 2452.
- 25 Tandra A. Bryant, "Guam Dems: Clinton Win Would Help Underwood," 4 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 3.
- 26 *Congressional Record*, House, 100th Cong., 2nd sess. (7 March 1988): 3500.
- 27 For detailed information on the commonwealth movement in Guam, see Robert F. Rogers, "Guam's Quest for Political Identity," *Pacific Studies* 12 (November 1988): 49–70; Robert F. Rogers, *Destiny's Landfall: A History of Guam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995): 271–290.
- 28 Ben Blaz, "Guam: Equal in War, But Not in Peace," 19 October 1991, *New York Times*: 22.
- 29 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (1 August 1986): 18622.
- 30 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 1st sess. (19 November 1985): 32463.
- 31 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; "Senator Vicente (Ben) Cabrera Pangelinan," official biography of Guam Senator Pangelinan, [http://senbenp.com/?page\\_id=6](http://senbenp.com/?page_id=6) (accessed 4 January 2012); "Guamanians Cast Ballots in U.S. Territory's Primary Election," 6 September 1986, Associated Press.
- 32 Donovan Brooks, "New Turn on the 'High Road,'" 10 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 1; Donovan Brooks, "Grassroots, Media Use Called Key to Success," 11 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 7. For an example of Blaz's campaign advertisements, see "Ben Blaz for U.S. Congress," 1 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 14.
- 33 Bryant, "Guam Dems: Clinton Win Would Help Underwood"; Fralé Oyén, "Election Postponed," 3 November 1992, *Pacific Daily News*: 1.
- 34 Brooks, "New Turn on the 'High Road.'"
  - 35 "Vicente Tomas (Ben) Blaz," <http://bisitaguam.com/bio/index.html> (accessed 9 January 2012).